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Death and the Cybernetic Mind

A review of the novel *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold

Raghav Rajagopalan[1]

Sebold, Alice (2002) The Lovely Bones. London: Picador (an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd), Pan Macmillan, 20, New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR. ISBN 0 330 485377. Hard bound, published price £ 12.99.

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Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* was published in 2002; and released in cinema adaptation in 2010. As a runaway success, doubtless many reviews and discussions would have taken place. This review is experimental: It seeks to consider this popular novel from a perspective about systemicity. My concern here is with the plausibility of transmission of cybernetic ideas and systemic knowledge in popular cultures through practical and symbolic means, rather than explicit conceptual discussion.

Other concerns inform my desire to wrestle with an attempt to respond to this book. In my reading it had a compelling, haunting and powerfully beautiful quality—resonant and backlit. It transported me back to my brother's demise in 2003. A story about death would doubtless remind any reader of the one(s) that he or she has faced. However, my own experience had imprinted me with a radically altered—perhaps, heretical—perspective on the phenomenon, which I have wanted to write about. The novel reprises these ideas; compels me to revisit, exhume and perhaps attempt articulation.

The protagonist in Sebold's novel, Susie, is sexually assaulted and then murdered right at the start. She then goes on to narrate the story from her personal heaven. This is a brilliant stroke of literary technique that provides the canvas for an examination of our constructs around death.

At once, this location provides for an unusual perspective, as Susie can then be present at and witness any of the myriad events that unfold from this point on, and link them all in a single coherent pattern of meaning. This device further permits semiotic interpretation by the narrator of everybody's actions and all events. I think this creates a situation where Sebold's imagination of a space for an omniscient knowledge of human affairs, makes us review the limitations of our own human perspectives and knowledge. By our partial knowledge, do we know and intuit wider patterns than we know that we know? What is this chilling knowledge in the bones that we frequently and conventionally refer to—an idea that there is a vast understanding of all there is to know deep within our bones? Sebold takes a strong stab at these epistemological puzzles in crafting her story. There are dialogues between Susie, and her mentor in heaven—Franny, her "intake counsellor" (Sebold, 2002, p. 18) who tells her how she

1. Hull University Business School. Email: R.Rajagopalan@2012.hull.ac.uk

can "walk the paths" to knowing nearly all (Sebold, 2002, p. 20), which are reminiscent of the metalogues (Bateson, 1987, 2000).

Mary Catherine Bateson, in her foreword to *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*—an anthology of her father's articles, has attempted to explain and place his work in context in a statement that personally moved me as a deeply human testimony while it is a concise summary and synthesis of his ideas. She talks about Gregory Bateson's work as "examining mental phenomena and the world of ideas in a biological context … behind it an emerging concern for integrative changes that would offer the possibility of ongoing systemic health" (Bateson, 2000, p. ix). Sebold's novel applies a similar juxtaposition—it examines the protagonist's mental processes against the concrete context of the biological and social unfolding of a set of people in relationship to her; and it depicts a slow eventual process of integration and systemic healing. Time, as it were, really considered, is fluid, in Susie's heaven. At points, it freezes, or even flows backwards, as the protagonist revisits people and events to puzzle and glean the networks of relational meanings they held for her while she was alive. By this device coupled with the dead protagonist continuing to narrate from the time space of the living, the author knits connections across these two spaces, and creates, as it were, a new mind, spanning across unfamiliar dimensions.

The novel is masterfully etched;—sparingly, in delineation of the storyline; poetically (with superb balance and grace that renders deep inner meaning while avoiding sentimentalism), and cunningly, in its puzzling exposition of how meaning is to be built about this painful business of living and dying (for such might after all be the best way to point to things beyond logical, scientistic comprehension)—its careful construction displays a certain rigour reminiscent of the writings of the great systemic thinkers. Together, these three elements of craft synthesize a mesmerizing portrait—like a renaissance chiaroscuro built from simple basic elements of chalk, brush, pigments and veneers. The outcome is a startlingly illumined and realistic three dimensional picture that is at once real and fabricated.

Susie, the protagonist, at 14, in the very first few pages, is brutally lured by a neighbor on her way back from school. The deed is done; and narrated with precision and efficiency. Its place in the novel cannot be mistaken—not only does the novel begin directly with this event; but its narration is chillingly bleak and unvarnished. This creates a certain pattern of attentiveness in the reader to the many threads that are spun out and gathered together finally in the vast thoughtscape of a ghostly narration. As the novel gives out, the tension is built further from the reader's slow realization that the author will not provide the usual redemption—a series of cascading thrills with an eventual emotional release such as the denouement with the villain meeting his just desserts.

A fine tapestry is built from the sparse narration of events, balanced against a strange bird's eye view of them that Susie begins to provide from her personal heaven (Sebold, 2002). As Mary Catherine Bateson, in her foreword (Bateson, 2000, p. x) says, Bateson argued that the ecology of mind is an ecology of pattern, information, and ideas that happen to be embodied in things—material forms. The novel depicts

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precisely this symmetry by juxtaposing mental events in the disembodied protagonist against material events in the life of her family and friends. Two patterns of events unravel—scarily bone close to life.

One, the assaulter is shown to be clever and methodical—a serial killer with a past; many leagues ahead of any possibility of the agencies catching up with him. At the same time, a few strokes reveal the essential form and pattern of his life, like a bonsai tree, and so humanize him. This does not spill over into extensive psychological archaeology to explain or justify; only fills out the character realistically to an extent the author deems desirable. (That sort of explanation—a psychological excavation into a traumatized and demented past—is one trip that appears satisfying and fulfilling from an armchair, but is frequently not the answer in real life).

Two, many events careen out from the watershed of Susie's disappearance. Strange bonds are forged and rendered asunder—her mother finds solace in adultery and desertion, her father embraces the hunt for her killer as his one life goal, her siblings and friends grow into adulthood in very poignant ways—all in the shadow of her "presence." (Which is real as narrated by her: the voice in the novel is Susie's first person account—albeit from her balcony in her personal heaven). This careening arc of loss and pain eventually pays out and starts folding in again—ever so naturally, and small redemptions—the mother's return, siblings and friends establishing relationships—are rendered with poesy and gravitas.

The protagonist's sense of knowing, an anticipation of patterns that are to unfold, a sense of how necessary attractors must play out their consequences; how the elastic limits of the relationships in their emergent patterns reassert a return to psychological and social well being; how meaning inheres in the nature and pattern of the relations and not so much in the properties of the relational objects—all of these things are transmitted with flair. It is almost like the author has made a stupendous (and, in effect, correct?) assumption that we do all know these aspects in our bones. So, she simply goes on to sketch them boldly and sparingly, in the assurance that reader understanding will follow. This is a sense of practical and symbolic knowing—a pattern that I encounter frequently in popular culture—in traditions of learning and communication in many arts, performing arts, crafts, and certain healing and livelihood traditions.

In my reading, the implicit statements that echo my experience are on these lines: that purpose and knowing do not end with death; they are immanent realities of the mind ecology. We call to the dead in our memories of unfinished relational goals, as much as the dead call to us, in our memories of their unfinished tasks. These "presences" illumine and guide the vast network of sentient relationships like the flapping of butterfly wings that set off thunderstorms. But that redemption, ultimately, is about giving up the cherished human illusions that crystallize and ossify from these relational pulls with the living and the dead …

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> and I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections—sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent—that happened after I was gone. (Sebold, 2002, p. 320)

It takes imagination—a courageous leap of knowing—to embrace death. Or, to put it another way, it takes imagination—a courageous leap of faith—to embrace death. C. Rajagopalachari, a savant, and the only Indian to have been a Governor-General of India, once said about mastery that knowing and faith are one and the same thing. We might compare this with a not dissimilar sentiment in more conventional English: "responses of awe and recognition involved responses to pattern—a kind of knowing—leading to respect for the systemic integrity of nature, in which we are all, plants and animals alike, part of each other's environment" (M. C. Bateson, in her foreword about a conviction Bateson carried; Bateson, 2000, p. xi). And in such a leap—of faith in knowing—we grace and illumine life. And to feed that knowing into our lovely bones it takes an Alice Sebold. (Perhaps, knowing of certain kinds—the knowing of forms over the knowing of things—is more easily communicated in practical and presentational terms than in propositional terms). And, to constantly replenish our possibility of redemption as a human, it takes the death of some—like Susie, my brother, and other brave hearts... several of them, to dissolve the contents of ossifications and free our imaginations. No death is senseless, as no life is.

In the essay titled "Form, substance and difference" (Bateson, 2000), Bateson argues that we can look at death and life in two ways—the survival of something bounded in skin or the survival of a system of ideas in circuit. He writes, "If the mind is immanent not only in those pathways of information which are located inside the body but also in external pathways; the individual nexus of pathways which I call 'me' is no longer so precious because that nexus is only part of a larger mind" (Bateson, p. 328). Death can happen to ideas inside someone's head/skin; but ideas out in the world—in books or works of art may live, flourish, transmute, reappear …

A creamy, luscious whipper snapper of a novel; a lush, decadent and surreal mix of earth and heaven. (For did you realize, in the interstices between words, great authors conjur wormhole portals that instantiate us into the very heavens?)

Like a bar of Green and Black's Organic Chocolate, delicately flavoured with chilli, ginger, or mayan gold spices; Italian mocha, Mexican mole poblano, Indian chikoo-chocolate milk shake ... choose your earth-and-heaven taste. Stock up; then sit on a swing (provided in Susie's heaven), set your sights on the horizon, and titrate heaven and earth for a good half an hour. Consider next: should I pick up Alice Sebold and dare to know my own meanings; the meaning, for example, of the vast presence of rape in our society?

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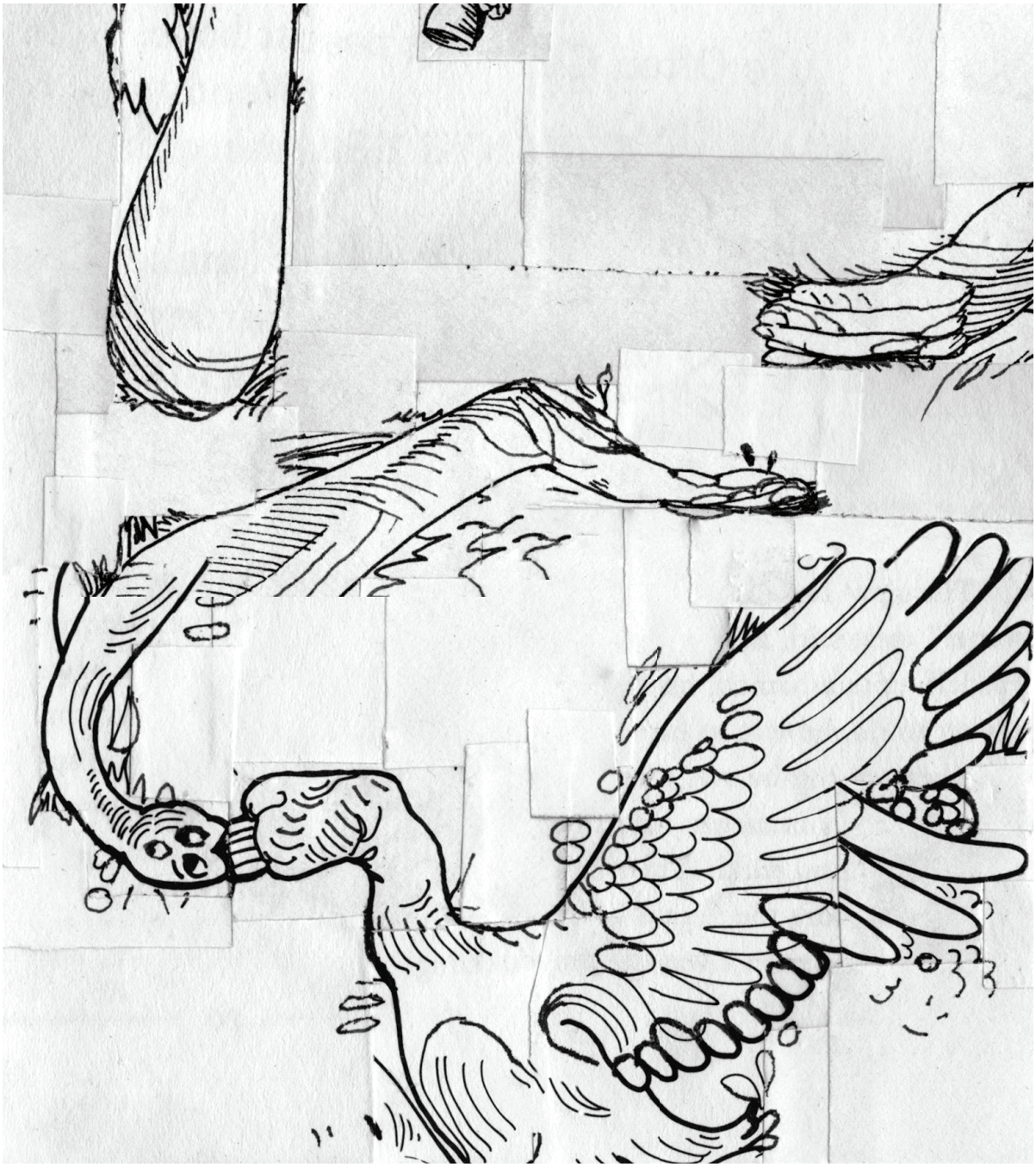

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